

Editorial

## **New Directions, for a Long Journey**

When the earth shifts, cracks appear in solid walls, and some collapse. Buildings that have always seemed to offer the security of enduring shelter acquire in an instant the terrifying insecurity that threatens death. So too the shifts and rumblings in deep strata of society cause sudden shudders of adjustment on the surface and can create panic in even elaborate educational institutions, set in its hardened crust.

Since the single most dramatic change that prompts most of the articles in this issue is that of declining student numbers — a downward curve in populations that advance like great waves on the demographic charts — and since we are indulging in metaphor, perhaps the more appropriate one would be of water, not of land. The waterside establishments of those that go down to the sea in ships and do business in great waters are now being left high and dry by a radical drop in level. But the water is still there, even if much further away and very inconvenient to get to for people accustomed to having it come right up into their docks and alongside their warehouses.

About a year before this issue could appear, the authors of these articles were exchanging with colleagues their views on the emergency that had already begun. The water continues to drop, and for the rest of us, anxiety deepens. But there is no panic in these pages. The situations of the affected institutions — school boards, teachers associations, faculties of education, and universities — are examined as to how they may not only adjust to, but also take advantage of the common danger threatened by the depredations of Fiscal Restraint. (Forgive an editor's freakish mind, but does that name not bring to mind some mythic figure out of Celtic literature, that strode in ancient days about the legendary sward of Ireland — Fiscal O'Strainth, Lord of the Green Pastures that be by the Great Bog of Leornan?)

There is, seriously enough, an insidious but tremendous danger that the members of these institutions of education, in seeking ways to safeguard them under the imminence of severe constraint, may be seeking only a survival of livelihood for themselves even when finding new directions for their efforts. John Evans warns against this; and indeed none of the authors have suggested anything underlying their discussion but a lively concern for the quality of education to be offered to the oncoming generations. Yet there are clear signs that the contemporary decline in enrolment is not merely a matter of decline in population alone.

All workers in education and their institutions may be said to make their living out of an engineered demand for learning that has been largely created and sustained by the machinery of the society in which they are embedded. Thus the demand to learn may be said to have been imposed upon all those who enter society from its cradles. When this imposition is withdrawn, or made uncertain, education must fall back upon some demand for learning that will have to come, more naturally and spontaneously, from the potential students themselves. If it should transpire that the demand is to learn skills employable in the modern age, so be it. If the demand turns out on the other hand to match those long-established divisions (by academia) of what is worth knowing into the traditional fields of knowledge, how fortunate for universities, teachers associations, and school boards! But how unlikely. The prospects of that demand being satisfied, in whatever form it takes, by what is currently made available or about to be made available in educational systems, are negligible; as the news reports on the following pages unmistakably show.

The instruments capable of being deployed by a human society for its own salvation are pathetically few and weak, but of them the chief is probably its educational system. The authors of this issue are doing what they can to ensure that the system may survive its current shocks and thrive. That survival is certainly an essential condition, but equally certainly it is not a sufficient one, for arriving at some solution to the immense and global problem of the disowned young.

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